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## **Revising Pedagogical Strategies in Large Enrollment General Education Courses**

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*Deborah Craig*

Revising pedagogical strategies and content of the basic course in public speaking is important and timely for four compelling reasons. First at the national level, the Association of American Colleges and Universities is calling for redefinition and revision of liberal arts general education programs. Historically, liberal arts colleges and universities offered general education core and elective curriculum to provide students a broad look at a variety of disciplines and to establish a foundation of basic skills to carry them through their college career and into the working world. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (N.D.) suggests that U.S. institutions of higher education need to revise their general education programs to add depth as well as breadth to their general education courses; institutions need to provide students with clear and sound interdisciplinary connections between general education courses. As the AACU suggests, students often view the general education core as stand-alone courses that do not connect to their interests or future goals and offer only a superficial look at a discipline.

Second, institutions are experiencing pressure from outside constituencies to produce workers prepared to think critically, communicate effectively, problem solve, and do so in a diverse workplace in a global economy

(AACU, N.D.). Third, few departments on campus can boast a core course that is required of every student entering the institution. Departments lucky enough to negotiate this luxury are under scrutiny to provide a quality experience that meets stated goals developed by the AACU (N.D.) and endorsed by the local institution's governing body. These goals include: 1) studies that move beyond the classroom to the world's major questions, 2) a focus on student learning, 3) diversity of approaches to education and 4) "integration of elements of the curriculum traditionally treated as separate" (p.1). Last in order but not importance, a changing student population (AACU, N.D.) requires and deserves the best effort on the part of educators to develop general education courses that encourage intellectual development by presenting multiple perspectives, challenging students to think critically, emphasizing disciplinary interconnectedness and preparing students to function in an ever changing work force.

The goal of this paper is to describe and present initial findings of a pilot research project conducted spring semester 2005 and funded through a fellowship from the Academic Development Center at the author's university. The pilot project focuses on the pedagogical strategy of speaking themes and how the use of themes can facilitate the goals of the AACU, address student intellectual development and increase motivation through student autonomy. This paper identifies a problem, briefly reviews communication education literature, presents a theoretical perspective from which to view the problem, presents initial findings, and discusses implications of theory application and initial findings.

## THE PROBLEM

Large enrollment general education courses, specifically the basic course in communication labor under several meaningful constraints. First, they are often taught by a variety of staff (lecturers, teaching assistants, and part-time faculty). Managing a varied staff and multiple sections of a course is a difficult task, (taken on by only the bravest among us) often addressed by using highly structured workbooks, and standardized textbooks, exams, assignments and activities. While this enables the goal of similar experiences for all it also presents a teaching and learning atmosphere that does not allow for autonomy for the educator or the student. The situation might be more palpable were there an entry level public speaking text that provided a true picture of the multiple perspectives on speaking that our rich discipline offers.

What will become apparent as we look at the literature on communication education, motivation, and educational psychology is that the strategies that allow us to run a large enrollment core course efficiently are the strategies that may actually thwart intellectual development, critical thinking, and student motivation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The discipline of communication has a rich history in research in the college classroom. Even the most cursory review of the literature shows a dedication by our scholars to understand how communication can work to en-

able students and educators to achieve educational goals. Kerssen-Grip, Hess & Trees, (2003) examined “face-work” and its effect on student motivation. Non-verbal immediacy behaviors and their effect on communication apprehension have been researched by Gorham & Millette, (1997). Bourhis and Berquist (1990) researched communication apprehension, learning styles and instructional strategies. Scholars also examine content issues such as teaching civil discourse and ethics in the public speaking classroom (Gayle, 2002). A thorough review of communication education literature would fill volumes. Suffice to say we see the relevance of communication in the classroom. One area that is lacking in research in the communication classroom is the application of theories of student intellectual development, autonomy, and how it relates to student motivation, pedagogical choices and course content choices.

## THEORY

William Perry (1971; 1985) presents a theory describing the intellectual and ethical development of college students. Perry’s (1971) original work on development describes students moving through nine positions as they develop intellectually. Nilson (1998) summarizes Perry’s work succinctly; students move from the beginning position of dualism where they see the world as black or white, to multiplicity where they recognize that uncertainty and multiple opinions exist, to relativism where they “abandon their faith in authority’s ability to identify the truth” (p.8). Students turn a corner of sorts at this point in their development, by beginning to ori-

ent themselves in the relativistic world. The last three stages begin with a “general cognitive stage of commitment” (p.9) where students make a tentative commitment to a particular view. The ending stage of commitment presents the student as self-actualized in their ability to commit, and then modify commitment through reflection and experience. The students ending position is in essence that of a life long learner and commitment is an “ongoing unfolding activity” through which life is expressed (Perry, 1971, p. 10).

Nelson (1993) suggests that educators can encourage the passage through these stages by presenting students with the multiple perspectives and standards of comparison that are the heart of any discipline. Educators who embrace this perspective find that pedagogical strategies can be successfully employed to facilitate the intellectual and ethical development of their students. Nilson, (1998) outlines these strategies and they can be applied in the public speaking classroom. First, these strategies include introducing students to the variety of interpretations that can be made of an event for example interpretations of a specific speech act as it occurs in a variety of rhetorical genre. Second, educators can present differing conclusions that can be made by examining a speech act from a variety of perspectives such as Aristotelian persuasion vs. invitational rhetoric (Foss & Foss, 1994). Third, instructors can explain the paradigm shifts that have occurred in the practice of the discipline, for example the shift from the Aristotelian, linear model of speaking to the feminine style (Campbell, 1989). Finally, we can examine unresolved issues, such as how speakers develop strategies for particular audiences, issues or events. After making students aware of

the multiple approaches to the speech act, educators can help students understand the criteria for selecting the best strategies for each topic, occasion and audience they might face as speakers.

The second theory applied to this project focuses on motivation and autonomy. Levesque, Sell & Zimmerman (2004) address the issue of autonomy with self-determination theory. Levesque, et al. (2004) see the teacher's role as "motivating students, providing guidance on learning strategies and offering feedback" They believe that educators need to move students from "external regulation" which takes the form of rewards, threats, evaluations, and deadlines, which a student perceives as an attempt to control (p.14) to a position of self-determination (provided by something as simple as the ability to choose from options) where the basic needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy are met. Research (Deci & Ryan, 2000) indicates that autonomy may be a student's most central need. Levesque, et al. (2004) suggest that even when the content of a course is clearly communicated to the student, retention and real-life application may not occur unless the educational environment supports student autonomy. Measuring a students sense of autonomy and motivation presents a challenge. But educational researchers have developed a tool to address at least one of these concepts.

Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, (1991) examined motivation and student learning and in doing so they developed the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) to measure student perceptions toward motivation and learning. The questionnaire looks at motivation scales by examining both intrinsic and extrinsic goal orientation, self-efficacy and test

anxiety, and learning scales through examination of cognitive and metacognitive strategies and resource management strategies. These theoretical perspectives provide guidance in developing course structure and content, and in the selection of pedagogical strategies used in the pilot study.

## METHOD

Based on the review of communication literature, and educational, and psychology research in teaching and learning the following method of investigation emerged. First the decision to use speaking themes occurred. The theme approach had been used in previous semesters and students provided positive feedback on the experience (Craig, 2004). Using speaking themes allowed the instructor to address issues like rhetorical genre, a variety of speaking styles, and fostered interdisciplinary connections by encouraging students to look to their personal areas of interest.

The special themed sections of the basic course in public speaking were listed in the course catalog with specific themes noted. Student advisors were notified about the theme sections and students were allowed to self-select into a themed section that interested them or connected to their major area of study. Themes included: madmen and geniuses, civil liberties vs. homeland security, stem cell research, unpopular culture and social activism. Three instructors participated in the special sections. The variable of individual differences in instructors was to be balanced by comparing student evaluations of each instructor. Themed sections used a



different textbook than the regular sections, had one less “assigned” speech (more on this later), completed the MSLQ, (Pintrich et al, 1991) a pre and post assessment, and did several journal reflections regarding their experiences speaking and what they were “really” learning from their experiences. These measures supplied both quantitative and qualitative data for examination. Presently this data is being organized and tabulated. Since this was a pilot study the intention is to conduct the formal study fall semester 2005. The preliminary findings and the research experience will inform the conduction of the final study.

## INITIAL FINDINGS

The pilot project provided useful information to guide the formal study. First, the use of speaking themes, the original impetus for the research project proved more complicated then expected. Students were expected to self-select into the themed courses according to interests or major area of study. The ability to self-select we speculated would give students a sense of autonomy. We found on the first day of class that few students were aware that the section was a special themed section. Even though the information was printed in the course catalog, available on line for those registering electronically and advisors had been notified, few students were aware. Once students became aware of the theme, the study, and the course expectations they were given the option to participate or be transferred to another section. Even though most were unaware of the theme, very few students opted out of

the course. Students exercised their autonomy, they had a choice to stay or leave.

The second interesting issue concerning the theme was the success or failure of a particular theme. We found that the more general the theme (madmen and geniuses, civil liberties vs. homeland security) the more successful the theme. The least successful theme was stem cell research. Students in that section voted to abandon that theme after the first speech. What seemed to matter the most was that the theme was general enough that students had leeway in interpreting the speaking topic. (A list of speech topics generated by students in the section themed “Madmen and Geniuses” and “Unpopular Culture” is included in the Appendix.) In the formal study, the theme will be general in nature and students will not be aware of the theme until the first day of class. The theme will reflect an interdisciplinary perspective to accommodate a variety of student interests.

The next major issue emerging from the pilot study was the problem of controlling for individual instructor idiosyncrasies. First, even though we developed a “script” to use in the initial presentation of the course/study to the students we do not feel confident in suggesting that the courses or the study were presented equally in all sections. Second, the amount of data collected from ten sections was overwhelming.

The formal study will include only two sections, one taught in the regular format, one taught using the themed format both sections being taught by the same instructor. This supplies a control group for comparison and eliminates individual instructor differences. This also allows for autonomy for both the instructor and the

student. Students and the instructor have more freedom to make changes in the course as the semester progresses i.e. vote to abandon a theme. This provides ownership of the course for the students, which might bolster student perception of autonomy. We know from the aforementioned research (Deci & Ryan, 2000) that autonomy may be a student's most central need.

A secondary issue affecting autonomy comes with the number of "assigned" speeches. In the pilot study we made the decision to include three formal speeches, informative, persuasive, and special occasion. All "regular" sections are assigned four speeches. We made this decision due to time issues with data collection. After students looked over the semester assignments and the informative speech was completed, a group presentation assignment was added. Student feedback regarding the group presentation assignments was very positive. In essence, students had given four speeches.

All students in the themed sections completed the MSLQ (Pintrich, et al. 1991) and were provided with feedback on their motivation and their learning strategies using the feedback sheets included with the MSLQ package. It is the assumption of the researchers that this information empowered the students with self-knowledge and thus increased their motivation. Based on ideas reflected in the self-determination theory, (Levesque, et al 2004) which espouse the importance of competence, autonomy and relatedness this assumption should prove out. Journal entries and reflections, which have yet to be analyzed, may indicate the accuracy of our assumptions.

The journal entries may prove the most important data for this study. Perry's (1971) thorough documenta-

tion of his methods including transcripts of student's conversations with advisors describing their college experiences will serve as a guide when analyzing student journals. What students say about their experiences in the public speaking class will be analyzed to determine their progression through the nine positions that Perry describes in his theory.

## IMPLICATIONS

We know that students often malign general education as disconnected from their interests, their major and their future lives. Every educator knows that motivating students is one of the most difficult tasks we face. Based on theories of intellectual and ethical development (Perry, 1971) and self-determination as it applies to motivation (Levesque, et.al, 2004) we can see a possible path to addressing these issues in general education courses through their structure and pedagogical approaches and in the content we select to present. Educators can move toward satisfying AACU goals for core curriculum courses. It is our responsibility to consider all research when developing, structuring and implementing general education courses, whether that research is in rhetoric, education or psychology.

While this research project is still in the developing stages a review of the literature and the pilot study indicate that educators involved in general education courses have several important questions to address. First, what can we do to improve public speaking textbooks? Presently the overwhelming majority of public speaking texts focus on a single view of speaking, the

Aristotelian view. How does that reflect the richness of our discipline and thus address the issue of intellectual development, as posited by William Perry? How does that facilitate the student to move from dualism to multiplicity to relativity? Where is the entry level, public speaking textbook that reflects the richness and multiplicity of our discipline? Without such a text we cannot expect a teaching staff with varied levels of experience to function at their highest level.

The next important question is how do we provide a reasonably similar experience for all students and still allow student autonomy and increased student motivation? Presently the majority of large enrollment courses in public speaking are strictly standardized. How does that encourage student autonomy? How do we motivate students when the focus of our evaluation of their abilities is based on “external regulation” (Levesque, et al, 2004, p. 14) rather than critical reflection on the speech act? How do we move to a place where standardization, the product of general education committees and staff constraints, gives way to a position of autonomy for instructors and students? In this place instructors have flexibility and students have choices. In this place all participants in the educational process benefit because the multiple perspectives of our discipline are represented. In this place we might actually facilitate our students’ movement from dualism to self-actualization. In this place we have a better chance of motivating, challenging, and fostering critical thinking.

Thus the position of this project becomes that of allowing more freedom in the standardized course: more choices for students, more flexibility for instructors, a deeper look into the art of rhetoric, presentation of a

wide variety of speaking styles, and evaluation on not only speaking skills but also on a students ability to think critically about the speech act.

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## APPENDIX A

This is a representative list of topics generated in a themed section of public speaking. The theme is madmen and geniuses.

Abnormalities in the brain that explain mental illness  
Academics  
Actors  
Rowland Anderson (Architect)  
Artists  
Augustus Caesar  
Authors  
Autism as a source of genius for historical figures like  
    Einstein or Newton  
Nina Karlovna Bari (Mathematician)  
Beethoven  
Biblical characters  
Napoleon Bonaparte  
Ted Bundy  
Ray Charles  
Characteristics of madmen/geniuses  
Child prodigies  
Chopin  
Nicolas Claux (The vampire of Paris)  
Marcus Aurelius Commodus Antoninus  
Copernicus  
Criminal insanity  
Cult leaders  
Pierre and Marie Curie (Discovered Polonium and Radium)  
Jeffrey Dahmer  
Salvador Dali  
Discuss who the greatest madman/genius was and why  
Discuss one deceased madman/genius who could benefit the  
    world if he/she were alive today  
Thomas Edison  
Albert Einstein



Emily Dickinson (Writer)  
MC Escher (Artist)  
Film directors  
Films based on serial killers  
Benjamin Franklin  
Sigmund Freud and Psychoanalysis  
Robert Frost (Poet)  
Maria Gaetana (Mathematician)  
Bill Gates  
Johannes Gutenberg (Inventor of the printing press)  
Stephen Hawking  
Ernest Hemingway  
Adolf Hitler  
Howard Hughes  
Saddam Hussein  
Individuals for *your* field of study who are/were  
madmen/geniuses  
Inventors  
Jack the Ripper  
Michael Jackson  
Thomas Jefferson  
Dr. Jack Kevorkian  
Stephen King  
Martin Luther  
John Lautner (Architect)  
Literature written by madmen/geniuses  
Mad Hatters: Chemical induced insanity (Look it up! This is  
wild!)  
Mad women throughout history  
Christopher McCandless (Subject of “Into the Wild”)  
Timothy McVeigh  
Michelangelo  
Military leaders  
Multiple Personality Disorder  
Music and Genius/Madness: Exploring the relationship  
between them  
Dr. James Naismith (Inventor of Basketball)  
John Nash

Sir Isaac Newton  
Nature versus nurture and madmen/geniuses  
Oratory prowess and madmen/geniuses  
Painters  
Pablo Picasso (Painter)  
Poets  
Political leaders  
Prophets: Geniuses of madmen?  
Psychological disorders and their relationship to creativity,  
    innovation, etc.  
Representations of madmen/geniuses in popular culture  
Role models of madmen/geniuses  
Sylvia Plath (Writer)  
Shakespeare (Madness in reality and on the stage)  
Social change and madmen/geniuses  
People who were ahead of their time (Predictions and  
    outcomes: i.e. Einstein said nuclear energy would never  
    be obtainable)  
Poetry written by madmen/geniuses  
Anne Rice  
Revolution leaders/starters  
Savants  
“The Rite of Spring” (Stravinsky)  
Serial killers  
Social acceptance of madmen/geniuses  
Songwriters  
Stereotypes of madmen/geniuses in pop culture  
Vlad Tepes (The historical Dracula)  
Treatments for insanity: A historical perspective  
Vincent Van Gogh  
Richard Wagner  
What makes a genius a genius (Qualifications)  
Virginia Woolf  
Aileen Wuornos

This list was generated by the public speaking class of Lecturer,  
Chad Johnston, spring semester 2005.